THE "COMEDY OF DANTE"

BY JEFFERSON B. FLETCHER

The title of the book, wrote Dante to Can Grande, is: "Incipit Comoedia Dantis Alagherii, Florentini natione, non moribus." The Latin "Comoedia Dantis" means the "Comedy of Dante" as well as the "Comedy by Dante." I believe that Dante was quite aware of this ambiguity, and intends both of its alternative meanings at once. The poem was his Comedy in that he wrote it. The poem was his "comedy" in that it relates how from a state at the beginning "horrible and foul," he, the protagonist, came to a state at the end "prosperous, desirable, and gracious." And such is the order of any comedy. His purpose in telling his story is to lead others living in this life along the same road from a state of misery to a state of felicity.

Again, to take Dante at his own word, we should consider as part of his title the bitter qualifying phrase—"Florentini natione, non moribus." The surface meaning is obvious enough; but if the poem itself as a multiple meaning, might we not expect the title also to bear a deeper sense than meets the eye?

When Dante declares himself "Florentine in stock, not morals," he speaks after the redeeming experiences related in his poem. He has risen not only above his original state, but also above the state of his origin. His original state was the state of sin; his origin, the city of Florence, was a city of sin. This analogy may appear exaggeratedly fanciful, as well as unjust, but it is brought out continually in the poem itself. Florence, we are told, is la città, che di colui è pianta
Che pri' volse le spalli al suo Fattore.

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1 Ep. x, par. x.
2 The epithet "Divine" was given first in the edition of 1555, and its retention is, I think, a literary impertinence. Even if the contention in the present text is unwarranted, there can at least be no question that when a writer who so weighed and packed every item of his work gave a title, he meant it and meant something by it.
3 Ib.
4 Ib., par. xv.  ⇒  Par. ix, 127-128.
5 Ib., par. 7.
So planted by Satan, it has sprouted in envy, and flowered in greed:

E da cui è la invidia tanto pianta,—
Produce e spande il maladetto fiore
Ch' ha disviat le pecore e gli agni,
Però che fatto ha lupo del pastore.7

It is the “nest of malice.”8 It is blown up with pride.9 Bestiality is the mark of those Florentines who accompanied Dante into exile.10 Now so is the infernal City planted by Satan, or Dis,11 the abiding-place of “malice and mad bestiality,”12 and prison-house of those whose guilt was due, not to the less culpable incontinence of desire or temper, but to envy and malice. It would seem, therefore, that Dante would represent his exile from Florence as a providential escape quite comparable to his rescue from the three wild beasts of the dark forest. He even refers to Florence as a “sad forest” full of wolves.13 But the exact return to the taunt of his title is his self-gratulation in heaven itself:

Io, che al divino dall' umano,
All' eterno dal tempo era venuto,
E di Fiorenza in popol giusto e sano,
Di che stupor dovea esser compiuto! 14

Against this implication that the evil and arrogant men who banned him from his birthplace were after all unwitting instruments of Providence working for his salvation, may be alleged his desire and hope of return.

Se mai continga che il poema sacro,—
Al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra,
St che m' ha fatto per più anni macro,—
Vince la crudeltà che fuor mi serra
Del bello ovile ov' io dormii agnello
Nimico ai lupi che gli danno guerra,
Con altra voce omai, con altro vello

7Ib. 128-132. Fiore is literally the florin, allegorically the greed of which the florin is cause and emblem. For envy as a Florentine characteristic, cf. Inf. vi, 49; xv, 68.
8Inf. xv, 78.
9 Inf. xvi, 75.
10Par. xvii, 62.
11Inf. xi, 65.
12Ib. 82-83.
13Purg. xiv, 49-51, 64.
14Par. xxxi, 37-40.
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Ritornerò poeta, ed in sul fonte
Del mio battesmo prenderò il cappello;
Però che nella Fede, che fa conte
L'anime a Dio, quivi entra' io, e poi
Pietro per lei si mi girò la fronte.16

Superficially, indeed, the passage would mean simply that, won over by the splendor of his literary accomplishment, his fellow-citizens might one day readmit him to citizenship, and even crown him as poet at the baptismal font at which, a child, he had been admitted into the membership of the Church. But there are manifest hints of a deeper meaning. In that old time he had slumbered a lamb among wolves, their "enemy" indeed, but also their helpless victim. They had successfully "fleeced" and banned him. But one day his holy poem, mighty with the might of heaven as well as of earth, may "conquer"—not soften or appease, but conquer—their cruelty. Then will he return "with another voice, another fleece," and at the font of his baptism put on the "chaplet."

To understand what is implied in the word "conquer," we should recall what Dante declared to be the purpose of the Comedy, namely, "to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of felicity." 18 In other words, its purpose was to convert men to Christ, the Lamb of God.17 And he, Dante, has by the Vicar of Christ, St. Peter, been given the sign of the aureole of the Lamb’s apostle and prophet to men:

Pietro per lei (la Fede) si mi girò la fronte.18

Poet as he is, therefore, he speaks, and will speak, "with another voice," the voice of a prophet. Also, he will be clothed "with another fleece,"—that of the Lamb himself, which figuratively signifies, among other things, the humility which shall be exalted.19

The "chaplet," accordingly, which he shall put on at the baptismal font, while to the general it may signify the glory of a poet, rightly understood will be sign and symbol of the aureole awaiting him as prophet and doctor of the Faith, and already conferred in his

16 Ep. x, 268-270.  
17 Par. xxv, 1-12.  
18 Ep. x, 268-270.  
19 Par. xxiv, 2.  
18 Par. xxiv, 148-154.  
mystic vision symbolically by St. Peter. But he will return to Florence, speaking with the voice of the Lamb, and wearing the garment of the Lamb, only as Christ himself descended into hell as un possente

Con segno di vittoria coronato; or as he and Virgil, accompanied with that other "agnello," forced their way into the City of Dis, whose "lamentable houses" had been before denied them. And then, as Christ from hell drew Adam and Abel and Noah,

Ed altri molti; e fecegli beati;

so Dante would "bring to a state of felicity" those Florentines willing to heed the prophesying of his Comedy. As for the rest,—vae victis! For in rejecting him, they reject Christ's apostle. This is a bold saying, but Dante says no less. At the same time, he realizes that one so declaring prophetic mission, must present his credentials, must in some sort prove his inspiration. St. Paul had written: "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him, in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a Preacher? and how shall they preach, except they be sent?" Also, it is written: "A true witness delivereth souls; but a deceitful witness speaketh lies." One may deceive oneself, as well as others. How

20 Cf. St. Thomas, IV Sent. xxxiii, 3, 3, 3: "Aureola debetur doctoribus, et praedicatoribus, tantum docentibus ex officio vel commissione." Dante represents himself commissioned to teach both by Beatrice (Purg. xxxiii, 52-54), and by St. Peter (Par. xxvii, 54-66).

21 Dante uses agnello for both "angel" and "lamb." Cf. Purg. xvi, 18; Par. xxiv, 2.

22 Inf. viii-ix. It may be noted in passing that the angel, like Dante, is "disdainful" (Inf. ix, 88. Cf. Ib. viii, 44.); and that the "insolence" (tracotanza) of the evil ones in opposing the entry of Dante and Virgil into the infernal City had before been shown in opposing the entry of Christ into hell (Inf. viii, 124-126), and is paralleled by the insolence of the Florentines in barring Dante from their city.

23 Inf. iv, 55-61.


25 According to the Vulgate: "Liberat animas testis fidelis; et profert
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might Dante himself be sure that he was a preacher sent, that he was, in St. John's ampler phrase, "a true and faithful witness"? And even if sure himself, how might he persuade others to listen to him?

Although the whole Comedy is an answer to this question, within the Comedy there is yet one declarative passage specially calculated to win the favorable attention of his readers. This passage is the "exordium," as he calls it, of the Paradise, which runs as follows:

La gloria di colui che tutto move
    Per l' universo penetra, e risplende
    In una parte piú, e meno altrove.
Nel ciel che piú della sua luce prende
    Pu' io, e vidi cose che ridire
    Nè sa nè può chi di lassù discende;
Perché, appressando sè al suo disire,
    Nostro intelletto si profonda tanto
    Che retro la memoria non può ire.
Veramente quant' io del regno santo
    Nella mia mente potei far tesoro
    Sarà ora materia del mio canto.

To explain and reënforce this exordium, to drive home its high significance for those capable of understanding, is the real focus and point of Dante's Epistle to Can Grande. Since such interpretation of the Epistle is certainly not self-evident, however, I must try to justify it.

The Epistle, the authenticity of which is now generally accepted, has three parts,—(1) epistolary, (2) doctrinal, (3) expository. Or in plainer words, Dante begins with a personal address to his patron; then, under six heads, gives an account of the poem as an organic whole including the Paradise; and finally proceeds to an exposition of the literal sense of the "prologue" of the Paradise.

mendacia versipellis" (Prov. xiv, 25). Geryon, symbol of Fraud or Mendacity, who "tanto benigna avea di fuor la pelle," might be a reminiscence of the "versipellis" of this text.

27 Rev. iii, 14. Vulgate: "testis fidelis et verus."

→ Par. i, 1-12.


29 These are Paget Toynbee's terms.

→ Par. i, 1-36.
What must, I think, strike every thoughtful reader is the apparently capricious manner of treatment, especially in the so-called expository part. The doctrinal part at least covers the ground in outline; but it is expansive often over seemingly plain matters, and puzzlingly laconic where the reader would welcome help. The expository part discusses with technical subtlety and apologetic amplitude the first part of the prologue, the exordium, then, after a mere perfunctory division of the second part of the prologue, the invocation, breaks off lamely, alleging as excuse anxiety as to the author's "domestic affairs."

Superficially regarded, what Dante appears to be offering to his patron is a sample,—one might almost say, a bait. The reference to his "rei familiaris angustia" can be hardly other than a none too subtly insinuated appeal to the Magnifico's generosity. To produce the goods indicated by the sample, to expound the whole poem, or even the whole Paradise, on the scale adopted for the exordium, would be a long labor, yet assuredly one of "public utility." Dante will gladly undertake it, if . . . Can Grande's "magnificence" will but provide!

This conception of the Epistle may be true as far as it goes. On the other hand, it is also true that it is presented as an objectively right "foreword" to the poem itself. Let us examine the argument more closely.

"There are six points, then, as to which inquiry must be made at the beginning of every didactic work; namely, the subject, the author, the form, the aim, the title of the book, and the branch of philosophy to which it belongs." So Dante prepares for the doctrinal part of his commentary, conformably with the usual rhetorical rules. His six categories, however, are not on the same plane. The first four derive, as Pietro Alighieri declares, from Aristotle's precept: "scire est rem per causas cognoscere." The causes of anything fall into four categories,—efficient, material, formal, and final. This fourfold principle of causation gives Dante his first four topics, the first two being inverted in order,—namely,

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33 Cf. Ep. x, 73-74.  34 Ibid. 118-122.  35 Commentarium in Dantis Comediam, ed. Nannucci, Florentiae, 1895, pp. 2-3. Pietro's Prologus, or preliminary lecture, appears to be an interpretative amplification of the "doctrinal" part of Dante's Epistle.
subject, author,\textsuperscript{35} form, and aim. Dante’s two last topics—title, and branch of philosophy—are usually added, says Pietro, “magistraliter,” that is, as a matter of teaching practice. In principle, the information conveyed under them would naturally be brought out under one or other of the first four topics, since to know the causes of anything completely is to know that thing completely. The two supplementary topics only serve for added clarity and convenience of exposition.

The first or determining cause in any action is the final cause, the author’s aim.\textsuperscript{36} The aim which moved Dante, as author, to treat a certain subject-matter—namely, “the state of souls after death”—in the form of the Comedy, was, as he said, “to remove those living in this life from a state of misery, and to bring them to a state of felicity.” To that end he will show them the state of supreme misery—that of damned souls after death, and the state of supreme felicity—that of blessed souls after death. The Epistle itself defines only the latter: “... true blessedness consists in the apprehension of Him who is the beginning of truth,” as appears from what John says: “This is life eternal, to know thee the true God,” etc.; and from what Boëthius says in his third book \textit{On Consolation}: “To behold thee is the end.” This saying of Boëthius, “Te cernere finis,” is thus a brief but exact definition of the aim, or end (\textit{finis}), to which Dante would bring those living in this life.

To bring his hearers to this good end, however, he must first, as has been said, induce them to listen to him. To offer the needed inducement is the business of what the Rhetoricians call an \textit{exordium}. To make a good exordium three things are requisite, as Tully says in his New Rhetoric; that the hearer, namely, should be rendered favorably disposed, attentive, and willing to learn; and this is especially needful in the case of a subject which is out of the common, as Tully himself remarks.\textsuperscript{37} Dante’s subject is indeed “out of the common” \textit{(admirabilis)}; “for he declares that he will relate such things as he who beheld them in the first heaven

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Agente} has a secondary meaning of actor, or protagonist, also, as will appear presently.

\textsuperscript{36} Cf. St. Thomas, \textit{Summa theolog.} I-II, i, 2, c.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ep.} x, 318-324. Toynbee’s translation.
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was able to retain.”

This declaration by itself, continues Dante, fulfills the threefold purpose of his exordium; “for the profitable-ness of what he is about to be told begets a favorable disposition in the hearer; its being out of the common engages his attention; and its being within the range of possibility renders him willing to learn.”

Having said this, Dante immediately repeats it; and later, concluding the detailed exposition of the exordium, again he repeats that “the author says that he will relate concerning the celestial kingdom such things as he was able to retain; and he says that this is the subject of his work.”

“Et hoc dicit materiam sui operis.” It will be observed that Dante has silently amended his previous definition of the “subject” (subjectum), or “subject-matter” (materia), of his poem, or at any rate of the Paradise. Previously, he had declared his subject to be “the state of blessed souls after death.”

And this definition is often quoted by critics without apparent recognition of its curious inadequacy. It is as if one should define the subject of Hamlet as “the something rotten in the state of Denmark,” and altogether ignore Hamlet himself. The real subject of the Paradise is, on the contrary, “the state of blessed souls after death” which Dante saw, and so far as he could retain in mind.

And, as Dante by reiteration emphasizes, it is just the amending clauses that make his exordium a perfect one, capable of making the reader “benevolum et attentum et docilem,” of moving the reader’s desire and will equally with Dante’s own; until the reader may come to say:

già volgeva il mio disiro e il velle,
Sì come ruota ch’ egualmente è mossa,
L’ Amor che move il sole e l’ altre stelle,

as mediated for me through this “true and faithful witness.” In other words, Dante will be to his reader what Beatrice has been to him.

To achieve his end, therefore,—the salvation of his hearer,—

38 Ib. 328-330. 39 I. e., Par. 1-12.
40 “Nam in utilitate dicendorum benevolentia paratur; in admirabilitate attentio; in possibilitate docilitas.” Ib. 330-334.
41 Ib. par. xxx.
42 Either term would indicate the causa materialis.
43 Ib. 231-238.
Dante's treatment of his general subject,—"the state of blessed souls after death,"—could not be impersonal and objective like Milton's treatment of heavenly life in *Paradise Lost*. Milton did indeed express a thought at least analogous to Dante's when he wrote that "He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to be a true poet." Therefore, Milton might have added, he need not announce his qualifications in his poem, which by so much of nobility as it might possess, must prove him, its maker, to be also noble. Dante's purpose, the final cause which determined the form of his creation, was different. He was concerned not merely, like Milton, "to declare the ways of God to men" by an argument, however lofty, based upon external authority, however compelling. He would present such an argument, indeed, and would summon to its support the highest external authorities available, to wit, the self-revelation of God to men in Holy Scripture, as interpreted by Holy Church:

Avete il vecchio e il nuovo Testamento,  
E il pastor della Chiesa che vi guida:  
Questo vi basti a vostro salvamento!  

So far he is at one with Milton. But to appeal to men by such an argument alone might also be called a work of supererogation. His words just quoted almost imply as much. For if the Bible and the direction of the Pope suffice for salvation, what need is there for his *Comedy*?

In answer, Dante might say that indeed he neither could, nor would, add any least item to the body of the Faith as interpreted from the Bible by the Church. But, as he defined it,

Fede è sustanzia di cose sperate,  
Ed argomento delle non parventi.  

But if one has passed beyond faith to the certitude of knowledge, he can, as a witness, give testimony that must fortify the faith of others less favored of God. The "sustanzia di cose sperate" is the "sustanzia," or subject-matter of the *Comedy*, but its "argomento" is not "delle non parventi." *For Dante has seen these*
hoped-for things, even to their perfection in the direct and immediate vision of God, the cognition of his essence. And with him, as with St. Paul, it must be that God had vouchsafed this surpassing grace in order that he might be a witness unto men. St. Augustine had asked as to St. Paul: "Cur non credamus quod tanto Apostolo, Doctori gentium, rapto usque ad ipsam excellentissimam visionem, voluerit Deus demonstrare vitam in qua post hanc vitam vivendum est in aeternum?" And St. Thomas adds that St. Paul was vouchsafed his "rapture" not that he himself might be blessed, but that he might be a witness of blessedness. Moreover, no more than St. Paul, does Dante pretend to have seen all that the blessed souls after death see, but only so much as might be useful to confirm men's faith. For him and for his reader, Love's injunction would still hold: "Non domandar piu che utile ti sia." What then he saw, and was able to retain in mind and to communicate of his supernatural vision, was that which would be useful for salvation both of himself and of others. And in effect this residual boon is summed in the last words of all his message:

Già volgeva il mio disiro e il vele,
Èli come ruota ch'equalmente è mossa,
L'Amor che move il sole e l' altre stelle.

The "fulgore," the divine glory of what he had seen, had penetrated into his heart, and there re-glowed as perfect charity, and perfect charity is the one thing needful for beatitude. If his true testimony, set forth with all the art and inspiration accorded to him, can by its reflected flame so kindle the hearts of his hearers, his appointed task is done.

Dante's supreme credential, then, one making the appeal of his exordium altogether perfect, is that he has been an actual eyewitness of the divine things he will tell of, of the very Godhead itself. And it is that fact which makes his Comedy the most perfect of all comedies in that its curve of amelioration rises from the absolute zero of damnation apparently assured to the maximum of

* "Non enim rapiebatur ut esset beatus, sed ut esset beatitudinis testis." Ib. 8m.
* "Nec tamen oportuit quod omnis in se experiretur quae beatis inerunt; sed ex his quae experiebatur, etiam alia scire posset." Ib.
blessedness attainable in this life. He has been shown to stand alone with St. Paul in God’s favor. No wonder he dares to call himself “your friend” to the “magnificent and victorious Lord, Can Grande.” “Why not?” he exclaims. “Since even between God and man friendship is in no wise impeded by inequality.”* No wonder St. James assures him that the Church Militant has no son of greater hope than he;

Però gli è conceduto che d’ Egitto
Venga in Jerusalemme per vedere,
Anzi che il militar gli sia prescritto.50

No wonder the spirits met in purgatory and paradise, amazed at his mortal presence among them, reverently felicitate this special friend of God. Hugh Capet, for instance, declares himself eager to inform him,

perché tanta
Grazia in te luce prima che sii morto.61

Guido del Duca is more emphatic:

O anima, che fitta
Nel corpo ancora in ver lo ciel ten vai,
Per carità ne consola, e ne ditta
Onde vieni, e chi sei; chè tu ne fai
Tanto maravigliar della tua grazia
Quanto vuol cosa che non fu piu mai.62

And in paradise, Beatrice commends him to the “company elect” as recipient of this most special grace:

O sodalizio eletto alla gran cena
Del benedetto Agnello, il qual vi ciba
Si che la vostra voglia è sempre piena,
Se per grazia di Dio questi preliba
Di quel che cade della vostra mensa,
Prima che morte tempo gli prescriba,
 Ponete mente all’ affezione immensa,
 E roratelo alquanto!63

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* Ep. x, par. ii.
> Par. xxv, 55-57.
*” Purg. xx, 41-42.
*” Purg. xiv, 10-15.
> Par. xxiv, 1-8.
St. Thomas strikes the same note of holy eulogy:

Lo raggio della grazia, onde s' accende
Verace amore, e che poi cresce amando
Multiplicato, in te tanto risplende
Che ti conduce su per per quella scala
U' senza risalir nessun discende.44

Such illustrations might be multiplied. But indeed, everything in the poem is in its own fashion confirmative of the unique quality of the protagonist. Beatrice testifies to his exceptional endowment by nature and by grace.55 If in such strength he fell, he fell like Lucifer, son of the morning.56 In his conversion she, the "miracle,"57 effected a virtual miracle. And thereafter, the whole course of his spiritual progress is attended by virtual miracles. Demons and angels, sinners and saints, are diverted from their eternal occupations to his aid. Satan himself must permit his "shaggy side" to be used as a ladder. The very modesty of Dante's disclaimer to Virgil,—

Io non Enea, io non Paolo sono.58

proves in the event a humility which specifically exalts him. For in the proof, he shows himself privileged even as they. Like the one he descended into the lowest hell; like the other he ascended into the highest heaven; and returned alive to earth. In effect, the Lord had sent a messenger unto him, as he had sent Ananias to Saul; and what the Lord had said of Saul would apply also to Dante: "... he is a chosen vessel."59 unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake." 60 And the messenger had in effect also said to him, as Ananias to Saul: "Brother, the Lord, even, Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales; and he

44 Par. x, 83-87. 45 Cf. ib. 117-120, 136-138.
46 Purg. cxxi, 109-117. 47 V. N. cxxii, 39; Par. xviii, 63.
48 Inf. ii, 32.
49 Dante uses the word of himself Par. i, 14.
50 Acts, ix, 15-16. Revelation to Dante of what he must suffer for truth telling is made especially through Cacciaguida.
received sight forthwith.” 61 When Dante stands before St. John in heaven to profess the supreme Christian virtue of holy love, he is blind. His momentary blindness, like Saul’s, 62 is due to excess of light,—in his case, the effulgent glory of the spirit of the Apostle of Love. To reassure him, St. John declares that his sight is but “smarrita e non defunta,” and that Beatrice

ha nella sguardo
La virtù ch’ebbe la man d’Anania. 63

In other words, Dante explicitly asserts analogy between the conversion of Saul and his own. Also, there is another subtler analogy in one of the passages quoted from the Acts. Ananias said to Saul: “Brother, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou earnest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.” Bearing in mind the analogy between Ananias and Beatrice as instruments of the healing of Saul’s and Dante’s “confused” sight, we may recall the episode related in chapter xxiv of the New Life. There appeared to Dante, in the way as he came, Beatrice preceded by Giovanna, so called, as Love explained to him, “da quello Giovanni, lo qual precedette la verace Luce.” And Love, Dante continues, added immediately afterwards these words: “E chi volesse sottilmente considerare, quella Beatrice chiamerebbe Amore, per molta somiglianza che ha meco.” Manifestly, Beatrice is figuratively identified with “Light” (la verace Luce) and Love. 64

To the other St. John Dante declared that the healing of his eyes began when Beatrice entered their gateway “with the fire wherein I ever burn.” This fire, which gives also light, is love. 65 And, figuratively speaking, Beatrice entering into Dante with the fire of holy love is in principle equivalent to the Holy Ghost entering into the Apostles as a “tongue of fire.” 66 For the Holy Ghost is Love.

61 Ib. 17-18.
62 Ib. 3, 8-9.
63 Par. xxvi, 7-12. It was due to vista smarrita that the via was smarrita. Inf. i, 3.
65 Par. xxvi, 13-15. Cf. Purg. vi, 38; viii, 77; xxvii; Par. xx, 115-117.
66 “Et apparuerunt illis dispersitae linguae tamquam ignis, seditque supra singulos corum: et repleti sunt omnes Spiritu sancto.” Aeta, ii, 3-4.
In fact, from the Holy Ghost come both kinds of grace to which in the Comedy Dante lays claim. These two kinds are the “grace making acceptable,” and the “grace freely given.” Meriting the former, man is united to God. Given the latter, with or without merit, man receives power “above the faculty of nature,” to aid his fellowmen towards salvation. As has been shown, the ‘Dante’ of the Comedy possesses both kinds of grace in the highest degree, is in fact represented overtly and by manifold insinuation coequal in quality with the Apostle whose conversion was also by a “miracle,” who also, and otherwise alone of living men, had in rapture immediate cognition of the divine essence, and who also in the charity so infused bore the persecutions of evil men that he might reveal God unto others.

To modern ears, and I should think even also to medieval ears, a self-exaltation like this must appear, must have appeared, if not lunatic, almost blasphemous in its arrogant pride. Let me hasten, therefore, to make the distinction which the scholastically minded poet ever insists upon. I mean the distinction between quality and degree. Though he might repeat in kind St. Paul’s experience, and from the similar effect deduce similar causal grace, yet his experience and his grace might well be upon an indefinitely lower plane of perfection. Indeed, he confesses by implication to the sins of pride and envy and perhaps lust. And he is humble enough

67 “Duplex est gratia. Una quidem, per quam ipse homo Deo conjungitur, quae vocatur gratia gratum faciens. Alio vero, per quam unus homo cooperatur alteri ad hoc, quod ad Deum reducatur. Hujusmodi autem donum vocatur gratia gratis data, quia supra facultatem naturae et supra meritorum personas homini conceditur, sed quia non datur ad hoc, ut homo ipse per eam justificetur, sed potius, ut ad justificationem alterius co-operetur, ideo non vocatur, gratum faciens.” St. Thomas, S. T. I-II, cx, 1, c.

68 “Paulus sextupliciter excellit caeteros apostolos: scilicet quantum ad specialem electionem, secretorum Dei cognitionem, malorum perpessionem, virginalem integritatem, honorum operationem et maximam scientiam qua emiewit.” St. Thomas, II Cor. xii, lect. 3, prine. The only one of these excellences not attributed to the protagonist of the Comedy is “virginal integrity.”

70 Purg. xiii, 133-138.

71 At least, his terror of the purgative flame and scourching by it (Purg. xxvii, 13-51) have been so construed.
before Beatrice’s rebuke. True, even in this humility of self-denunciation he still parallels St. Paul, who said: “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.” For the “thorn in the flesh”—in the Vulgate “stimulus carnis”—is interpreted by Dante’s master, St. Thomas, as “prick of concupiscence,” and was given to St. Paul, not for his damnation, but to cure him of his spiritual “blindness.” Precisely so Beatrice declares that Dante

Tanto già cadde che tutti argomenti
Alla salute sua eram già corti,
Fuor che mostrargli le perdute genti.74

Really, he was shown the state of the damned, not objectively, but subjectively, in his own soul. One only knows sin by sinning. But even because his self-curative sinning was by divine mercy, he must be predestined to salvation.75

St. Paul’s further words, however, give the final clue to Dante’s attitude. When St. Paul besought the Lord that this “messenger of Satan,” this “prick of concupiscence,” might depart from him, the Lord answered him: “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, Dante’s “glorying,” like St. Paul’s, is in his “infirmities”; since in so “glorying” he is exalting the more the grace of God which has lifted him above them. And so indeed he would explain even the supreme “grace freely given” of his foretaste of beatitude, in his momentary beatific vision of God. Having asserted the truth of this vision, he adds in his Epistle: “Si vero in dispositionem elevationis tantae propter peccatum loquentis oblatrarent, legant

72 II Cor. xii, 7.
73 “Pecatum autem ad duo ordinatur: ad unum quidem per se, scilicet ad damnationem; ad aliud autem ex divina misericordia, vel providentia, scilicet ad sanationem; inquantum Deus permittit aliquos cadere in peccatum, ut peccatum suum agnoecentes humilientur, et convertantur.” St. Thomas, S. T. I-II, lxxix, 4, c.
74 Purg. xxx, 136-138.
75 “. . . haec misericordia non omnibus impenditur exaeccatis, sed prae-destinati solum, quibus omnis cooperantur in bonum.” St. Thomas, ib.)
76 II Cor. xii, 9.
Danielem, ubi et Nabuchodonosor inventen contra peccatores aliqua visisse divinitus, oblivionique mandasse. Nam 'Qui oriri solem suum facit super bonos et malos, et pluit super iustos et iniustos,' aliquando misericorditer ad conversionem, aliquando severe ad punitionem, plus et minus, ut vult, gloriam suam quantumcumque male viventibus manifestat.' 77 "There is no respect of persons with God." 78 In spite of his "infirmites," or mercifully through them, Dante has turned to the light reflected for him in Beatrice; he has been converted. He has received the "grace making acceptable" in sufficiency to be assured of ultimate citizenship in that Rome where Christ is a Roman. 79 For salvation his merit, however otherwise slight, is enough increased by the very reception of the grace bestowed.

E non voglio che dubbi, ma sie certo,
Che ricever la grazia è meritorio,
Secondo che l' affetto l' è aperto.80

The degree of "openness" depends on holy love, or charity, and his potential charity had been actualized by Beatrice, the incarnation on earth, and for him representative in heaven, of divine charity. In other words, Dante's saving merit is, like Folquet, "quis multum amavit." Indeed, Dante may have intended to draw a closer parallel with Folquet. For Dante too might say of himself:

questo cielo 81

Di me s' imprenta, com' io sei di lui.
Che più non arse la figlia di Belo—
Nolando ed a Sicheo ed a Crëusa—
Di me, infin che si convenne al pelo;
Nè quella Rodopeia, che delusa
Fu da Demofononte; nè Alcide
Quando Isole nel cor ebbe richiusa.82

Also, assured of redemption, he might echo Folquet's further words:

77 Ep. x, 557-569. 78 Purg. xxxii, 100-102.
79 Rom. ii, 11. 80 Par. xxix, 64-66.
81 Venus, the sphere of love which on earth had been "shadowed" with carnal desire. 82 Par. ix, 118-119.
83 Par. ix, 95-102.
Non però qui si pente, ma si ride—
Non della colpa, ch' a mente non torna,\(^83\)
Ma del valore ch' ordinò e provvide,—\(^84\)

that is, as already said, of God's "strength," which, made perfect
in his weakness, transformed his very fault into a saving grace.
Finally, his association with Folquet and the heaven of Venus may
be insinuated in Folquet's remark:

Ma perché le tue voglie tutte piene
Ten porti, che son nate in questa spera,
Procedere ancor oltre mi conviene.\(^85\)

In other words, Dante's "will and desire" are moved in perfect
accord with divine love, caritas in patria; but the grade of his
charity is indicated by association with the earth-shadowed heaven
of Venus.

If thus his future rank among the blest is comparatively modest,
among men he goes possessed of another grace "freely given,"
that is, altogether independent of his own merit, which makes him
an inspired instrument of God. God has revealed himself to him;
and by that revelation he is given the gift of prophecy, both fore-
seeing and far-seeing, that is, capable both of predicting future
contingencies\(^86\) and of interpreting things beyond sense. More-
over, with that gift is given also the ancillary gift, or grace, of
"discourse," the "bello stile" in which Virgil had indeed been his
human master,\(^87\) but now he follows the dictation of a power
greater than any human art, namely, of holy Love,\(^88\) which, in the
last analysis, is but the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, who is
Love.\(^89\)

\(^83\) Dante of course has already experienced this forgetfulness of his past
fault after immersion in Lethe. Purg. xxxiii, 91-96.
\(^84\) Ib. 103-105.
\(^85\) Par. ix, 100-111.
\(^86\) E. g., the coming triumph of the Veltro.
\(^87\) Inf. 1, 85-87.
\(^88\) Purg. xxiv, 52-54.
\(^89\) St. Thomas, S. T. I, xxxvii. Cf. ib. II-II, clxxvii, 1, 1m: "... Spiritus
Sanctus excellentius operatur per gratiam sermonis id, quod potest ars
operari inferiori modo." In connection with the above definition of
In spite of these distinctions, the question presses for answer—Did Dante—not the protagonist of the Comedy, but the actual Dante Alighieri who wrote the Comedy,—experience the mystic vision of God, or think so? Of course, to such a question a categorical yes or no is impossible. At most, we can only urge probabilities. To my mind, the gravest objection to taking Dante at his apparent word is the apparently total absence of contemporary acceptance of, or even interest, in the matter. If a man of Dante’s position and note had seriously put forward a claim not uncommon among mystics, we should hardly expect the conspiracy of silence that exists. His own son, Pietro, in his commentary frankly calls the literal story of the Comedy a “poetic fiction,” (ficta poesia). It seems unlikely that he could so misconceive so tremendous an experience of his own father’s.

Without pretending demonstrative certainty, I would offer a compromise view. Feeling himself moved by a strong spirit of charity actualized by the influence of Beatrice, Dante would have theological justification for believing himself given in consequence the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Principal among the gifts of the Holy Spirit are intelligence and wisdom, possessing which man “by a certain connaturalness” has cognition of divine things, not by discursive reason merely, but by a “divine instinct” above reason and participant in the intuitive faculty of separate, or angelic, intelligences. The terminus ad quem of this intuitive cognition of divine things is the beatific vision, or intuitive cognition of the supremely divine thing, God. Dante’s “poetic fiction,” then, would

Mr. E. G. Gardner in his Dante and the Mystics, finds more positively affirmative grounds in the Epistle to Can Grande than I can quite accept. Unquestionably, assuming the rôle of his protagonist, Dante writes as if he had had the vision.

“...qui charitatem habet, omnia dona Spiritus Sancti habet, quorum nullum sine charitate haberis potest.” St. Thomas, S. T. I-II, lxvii, 5, c. 26 “...Sapientia, quae est donum, causam quidem habet in voluntate, scilicet charitatem, sed essentiam habet in intellectu, cujus actu est recte judicare.” St. Thomas, S. T. II-II, xiv, 2, c. “...sapientia dicitur intellectualis virtus, secundum quod procedit ex judicio rationis: dicitur autem donum, secundum quod operatur ex instincetu divino.” Ib. I-II, lxvii, 1, 4. “...quamvis cognitioni humanae animae proprie sit per viam rationis, est tamen in ea aliqua participatio illius simplicis cognitionis quae in substantiis superioribus invenitur.” De ver. xv, 1, meo.
be to represent his protagonist as possessing to its human limit a gift of the Holy Spirit actually possessed by himself, but in lower degree. Such is his procedure with all his principal characters,—except indeed with the Virgin Mary, who needs no such enlargement of function. But Beatrice, who represents divine charity, _caritas in patria_, for him, is conceived as representing divine charity in itself. Lucia, the light-bringer to darkened eyes, becomes "intellectual light" itself. Virgil, the poet of a perfectly rational philosophy and unwitting prophet of Christ, becomes Reason itself made the instrument of God by the infusion of "grace freely given," but without the "grace making acceptable." Cato, martyr to self-freedom, stands for the very principle of Free Will. And so it is with the rest. Now one man actually fulfilled the requirements for making the human comedy of salvation perfect, who in this life rose out of the uttermost depths of spiritual misery to the uppermost heights of spiritual felicity. That man was of course St. Paul. And Dante, always imaginatively sensitive to analogies and correspondences more or less mystical, discovered many such between his own spiritual experiences and those of the Apostle,—enough at least to justify his asking, What man so worthy to represent St. Paul as Dante? even as he had asked, What man so worthy to represent God as Cato? But his poetically affirmative answer in his own case no more meant that he regarded himself as the actual peer of St. Paul than that his affirmative answer in Cato's case meant that he regarded Cato the actual peer of God.

In conclusion, it may be again noted that that which, as Dante said, gave "perfection" to his exordium—declaration of the beatific vision—gave also perfection, in the same literally rhetorical sense, to his "comedy" as such. It is altogether incorrect therefore to define the hero of the poem as allegorically signifying typical Man,—as, for instance, does the hero of _Everyman_ or Bunyan's Christian. The "Dante" of the _Comedy_, on the contrary,

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410 *The "Comedy of Dante"

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"Conv. IV, xxviii, 121-123.

*Cf. Paget Toynbee, *Concise Dante Dictionary*, s. n: Dante*: "... Dante, as he appears in the poem, represents in the literal sense the Florentine Dante Alighieri; in the allegorical, Man on his earthly pilgrimage; in the moral, Man turning from vice to virtue; in the anagogical, the Soul passing from a state of sin to that of glory."
represents, not mean humanity, but progressively the whole potentiality of human nature from worse than brute to equal with angel. Or,\textsuperscript{96} in other words, the character is an example, not of Man as he normally is, but of Man as he may by perversion of free will, or by the grace of omnipotent God, extraordinarily become. And the \textit{Comedy of Dante} is that, in the beginning a potential demon, he was raised by love of the perfectly loving Beatrice to connatural-ness with her, the actual peer of angels.\textsuperscript{96}

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\textsuperscript{96} Cf. \textit{Conv.} III, vii, 69-88.

\textsuperscript{96} This assimilating power of love is clearly stated by Albertus Magnus: ‘‘. . . est enim amor amantis et amati quasi quaedam unio potissimum in bonis, et naturaliter illud quod amatur, in sui naturam suum convertit amatorem.’’ \textit{De laudibus b. Mariae Virginis}, IV, xvii, 1.